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“CAN THERE BE NON-UNION FORMS OF WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP?”

by

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Structured abstract.

Please note: we consider this article to be a CASE STUDY.

Purpose.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a number of issues pertaining to the conceptualisation, operationalisation, feasibility and effectiveness of workplace partnership arrangements in a non-unionised setting.

Design/ methodology/ approach

The paper discusses the most common definitions of partnership to discern whether scope exists for non-unionised forms. It then presents a detailed case study, based on 38 semi-structured interviews with 29 interviewees, inside a non-unionised company to analyse whether its people management arrangements conform to the definitions presented, and to examine the employees' experience of those arrangements.

Findings.

The paper notes that most partnership definitions can accommodate non-unionised forms, if the arrangements for people management inside such firms meet certain standards on employee voice mechanisms and the exchange of mutual gains. The evidence from the case study suggests that its unusual policies and practices do conform to a viable model of non-unionised partnership – albeit with some reservations. The benefits and concerns are discussed in the paper.

Research implications/ limitations.

The paper presents a credible definition and observable operationalisation of partnership for researchers to adopt. It encourages future research on the extent to which so-called 'partnership' organisations, including non-union enterprises, comply and suggests comparative research between paired unionised and non-unionised cases. However, it is limited to one case study.

Value.

The paper's primary value is in its extension of the partnership debate beyond its current 'union-only ghetto' into examining non-unionised forms, as well. The case study is also unique in the literature as an example of non-unionised partnership.

Keywords

Partnership, non-unionism, organisational culture, UK, clothing.

“CAN THERE BE NON-UNION FORMS OF WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP?”

Introduction.

During the 1990s the idea of developing ‘partnership’ in British workplaces received warm endorsements from the New Labour government (DTI, 1999), ACAS (1999), as well as the TUC (1999) and most major trade unions. All adopted partnership as their official policy position on workplace relations (though recently there have been signs of its star starting to wane among the so-called ‘awkward squad’ of new trade union leaders: see Morgan, 2004; Woodley, 2004). More qualified support even came from employers’ bodies such as the CBI (see Taylor, 1997), and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD, 1998: 8).

That each can have found something in the idea to embrace is an indication of partnership’s considerable rhetorical appeal, with its “connotations of co-operation for mutual gain” (Tailby & Winchester, 2000: 374), but it also points to its “inherent ambiguity” (Bacon & Storey, 2000: 409).

One such ambiguity concerns the identity of the ‘partners’ in this relationship. In particular, who or what might constitute the ‘partner’ body for an organisation’s employees? The assumption in the academic literature on partnership, dominated as it is by research and commentary conducted within an industrial relations framework, has been that any partnership arrangement worthy of the name *must* involve an independent representative body acting on the workforce’s behalf (i.e. a trade union). Thus, the ‘partnership’ relationship is considered to be between the organisation’s management team and the recognised trade union(s). Indeed, partnership has been examined almost exclusively according to its impact on trade unions (Claydon, 1998; Gall, 2001; Geary & Roche, 2003; Haynes & Allen, 2001; Heaton *et al.*, 2002; Heery, 2002; Kelly, 1996; Martinez-Lucio & Stuart, 2002; Oxenbridge & Brown, 2002; Terry, 2003; Wills, 2004). However, the main advocates of partnership in the 1990s, the Involvement and Participation Association, not to mention the New Labour government, the CBI and CIPD, prefer to conceive of partnership as collaborative, mutually beneficial relations between an employer’s management team and its workforce primarily, with the latter represented by a trade union *if present*. Reconfigured in this manner, ‘partnership’ is a state of workplace affairs that is attainable – in theory, at least – in all settings, unionised and non-unionised alike, and hence has a potentially far broader appeal as a model of employment relations. Discussion of the latter phenomenon, however, is almost non-existent (see IPA, 1997: 17; IRS, 2000: 35-41; Terry, 2001). This paper sets out to address this gap.

We examine three questions in this paper. Firstly, what is workplace partnership? Secondly, can a non-unionised organisation design and conduct its people management processes in a recognisably ‘partnership’ manner? Thirdly, if it can, what would it be like to work in such a place? We explore these issues through a content-analysis of the most commonly used definitions of partnership to see whether compliance is conceivable in a non-unionised setting, and then through an in-depth case study of the practical implementation of a ‘partnership’ inside a non-unionised firm.

A definition of partnership.

Although no widely-held standard definition exists for workplace partnership, most commentators understand it to mean a programme for managing workplace employment relations based on joint problem solving among the various ‘partners’ which delivers mutually beneficial outcomes for all (for detailed reviews see Ackers & Payne, 1998; Kelly, 2004; Sparrow and Marchington, 1998; Tailby & Winchester, 2000; Terry, 2003). Dietz (2004: 7), following Guest and Peccei (2001: 208), argues that a *genuine* ‘partnership’ organisation should be able to point to the established and observable presence of a ‘bundle’ of specific principles

and practices for managing its employment relations in such a manner. He argues that the two most commonly cited and most influential definitions - from the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA, 1992; 1997) and the TUC (TUC, 1999) - offer a model for this, based on six key elements:¹

1. A joint commitment to the success of the enterprise
2. Mutual recognition of the legitimate interests of each constituency: management, employees and trade unions (where present)
3. A mutual commitment and effort to develop and sustain good working relationships, characterised by high levels of trust.
4. Structures and practices that allow for information sharing and joint problem solving between the workforce and management at all levels of the organisation
5. Policies and practices to address the balance needed between flexible work practices and employment security
6. Policies and practices to share the success of the organisation.

To take each in turn, elements 1-3 are considered to be organisational values (Marchington, 1998), or 'commitments' (IPA, 1992; 1997), endorsed by all parties which serve as *enduring* guiding principles for the management of employment relations within the organisation. However, the distinguishing characteristic of a *genuine* and, indeed, *sustainable and viable* partnership is how these three commitments, and for non-union forms the second in particular, are translated into the mediation and satisfaction of different constituencies' interests at work.

The central process through which partnership is established and conducted, and its outcomes secured, is continuous joint problem solving, alongside open and timely exchange of honest and accurate information, on a broad range of significant decisions affecting employees' working lives (element '4' above). The process has as its primary objective the delivery of mutually acceptable gains for all parties, realised in a process that is considered *qualitatively* superior to adversarialist forms of engagement. The structure and content of these arrangements is expected to involve permanent 'employee voice mechanisms' at the local *and* strategic levels (IPA, 1997; IRS, 2000: 7), through which employees' views are sought, and if necessary acted upon, *before* the decision is taken. Importantly, these arrangements can take direct consultative *and/or* indirect representational forms. (The TUC model, understandably, views direct forms only as an agenda-setting prelude to formal union-employer discussions.) Its vital quality is that employees' input into organisational decision-making must be freely facilitated, informed, proactive and influential on the final outcome, in a manner befitting the description 'joint problem solving'.

Two main policy outcomes are produced. The first is a "balance between employment security and flexibility" (element 5 above). What constitutes flexibility will vary from organisation to organisation, while 'employment security' is described as "a stable employment framework"

¹ Other conceptualisations and operationalisations contain more or less these same key elements. For example, Guest and Peccei (2001) operationalise 15 separate principles on the broad theme of mutuality (tellingly omitting 'autonomous worker representation' as a pre-requisite), plus a comprehensive range of possible management practices, bundled into 8 factors centring on worker participation, two-way communication, job flexibility, performance management, financial participation schemes, harmonisation and employment security. Haynes and Allen (2001: 167) depict partnership as involving mutual legitimisation of partners' different interests, a commitment to co-operative processes, joint decision-making/ consultation, a focus on organisational success and employment security. Marchington (1998) presents partnership on three levels: values (including the legitimacy of employee voice; a mutual agenda on competitive performance and flexibility, and a commitment to trust and openness); operational policies (direct communication; upward problem solving; financial involvement schemes, and representative participation), and complementary HRM practices (single-status and harmonisation; employment security, and training and learning). In other words, the spirit and content of most conceptualisations are similar; only how it is sub-divided into categories differs.

(IPA, 1997: 2) provided through, for example, a multi-year pay deal and/or a no-compulsory redundancy guarantee, complemented with careful joint management of unavoidable job losses, including policies for redeployment, retraining and job search support. The second policy outcome is 'sharing organisational success' (element 6 above). For the IPA, this incorporates not just good basic pay and participation in results-based reward schemes such as employee share ownership, profit-sharing or gain-sharing bonuses, but also organisation-wide celebrations of improved performance, staff 'perks', and harmonised terms and conditions. (The TUC's model confines the explicit benefits to employees somewhat narrowly to a "focus on the quality of working life" and "personal development"; financial reward is not addressed.)

A *genuine* partnership organisation can therefore be operationalised according to the extent to which its approach to people management contain principles, policies and practices that address each of these elements (see Dietz, 2004; Guest and Peccei, 2001). Moreover, to be considered a partnership *organisation*, these policies and practices should be accorded some degree of embedded permanence.

Given these exacting standards - particularly regarding staff consultation - trade unions, and their supporters, argue that only unions can provide the independence, strength and wealth of experience that permits effective joint problem solving (USDAW, 1998: 3). Unrepresented workers, they argue, lack the safeguards provided by trained professional representatives, and the strength derived from collective action. However, while we would readily agree with Guest and Peccei (2001) that partnership is far more likely to be observed in unionised representative forms, the six criteria for a legitimate partnership above do not rule out non-unionised forms. Two seem to us to be most critical: firstly, that the employee voice is adequately and freely facilitated at all levels such that employees enjoy significant influence over organisational decision-making and, secondly, that these joint problem-solving processes deliver regular, substantial benefits to both the management team and the workforce (Coupar, 1999). We draw on an in-depth case study inside one such non-unionised company to explore these issues.

Methodology and limitations.

The case study firm, Sportasia, featured in an article in *People Management* (Trapp, 2000) from which it appeared that its people management practices might conform to the operationalisation for a genuine partnership detailed above. An exploratory interview with the Managing Director confirmed this impression.

The fieldwork from which this case study has been developed was undertaken by two separate teams of researchers on five separate visits to the company in 2000 and 2001.² A total of 38 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 different interviewees (see Appendix), including all senior managers, several line managers and a sample of 20 'non-key players' from the production and administrative functions selected at random from a list of staff. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, using open-ended questions to discuss the company and its history, and the respondent's experience and assessment of its system of governance and people management practices, focussing particularly on commentary on the six partnership elements above. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes to 2 hours, depending on how much the person had to say. A hand-written record was made of interviewees' comments, and several interviews were also tape-recorded. Respondents' accounts of each element of partnership were then pooled, collated, analysed and cross-referenced to produce the case study that follows. Additional material was sourced from informal meetings, observing company workshops, documents, conference presentations, and media reports.

² Note that the case study covers developments in the firm up to this point. The company has since adapted many of its policies, and research is currently ongoing into these new developments.

Efforts to triangulate the data and to corroborate testimonies have reduced the impact of the methodological limitations inherent in the use of semi-structured interviews (notably problems surrounding subjective opinion passing as ‘fact’). One preventative measure undertaken was to ask the key contact (the Managing Director) to approve for accuracy the narrative section presented here. He requested no amendments. However, as with any case study, the content is ultimately our interpretation of the interviews ‘as a piece’.

Sportasia – background.

Sportasia is a privately-owned enterprise encompassing three businesses: “personalised school wear” such as sweatshirts, T-shirts, knitwear, skirts, dresses and sports kit sold under its brand name, ‘School Trends’; similar clothing products for the health and leisure industries, and a separate management consultancy arm established to “promote Sportasia’s philosophies and values” as well as generate additional revenue. The entire operation is based on a single site in Sheffield. In 2001 it employed 90 employees (June 2004 figure: 125). It was, and remains, the market leader for primary schools, supplying nearly 25% of the schools in the UK. The firm enjoys 90% year on year repeat business. In 2002 it posted £1m profits on a turnover of £7.7m.

Its business process is as follows: telemarketers, trained in-house, arrange appointments with customers for the firm’s team of 21 regional sales representatives. They secure contracts, and these are processed back at headquarters. Designers create computer programs of the customer’s logos and emblems, the program is then loaded onto disk and run on machines that either embroider or screen-print the designs onto the products. (These are sourced from three main suppliers with factories in the UK, Turkey and Portugal, each of which is audited annually for compliance with strict standards on production and working conditions.) The finished product is packed and despatched from the warehouse to the customer. As the majority of customers are schools, the work is highly seasonal. To cope with the increased workload during the summer months the firm uses a small pool of ‘casual’ staff.

Partnership at Sportasia – the development.

A feature of Sportasia’s progress toward partnership is that it did not emerge in response to a crisis, or from a restructuring, or from a generalised need to improve workplace relations, as is typically the case for unionised examples (Kelly, 2004: 270). Instead, the Managing Director’s people management philosophy when he formed the company in 1988 was to create an enjoyable work environment for himself personally, centring on two key values: a strong sense of the workplace as a ‘community’ of shared interests, and the pursuit of individual employee’s ‘self-actualisation’ (cf. Maslow, 1943) within the community.

In 1994 the MD’s mentor and co-owner of Sportasia died suddenly. When his widow elected to sell all but 5% of her 40% stake in the company, this presented the MD with an opportunity to enact his emerging philosophy. He offered the shares to the firm’s staff. Later that year, a weekend workshop for all staff examined the organisational model that had been incrementally established. This produced the text of the company’s first mission statement. The firm continued to reflect annually upon its culture, but business growth postponed a fuller appraisal until a series of day-long staff workshops in 1998. In small cross-functional teams, facilitated by trained supervisors, the workforce sought to encapsulate the company’s beliefs and values into a more expansive mission statement. It is noteworthy that the ‘*We believe...*’ statement is wholly employee-centric:

“It is the mission of Sportasia to offer people with shared goals and values, the opportunity for continued personal and professional development, by cultivating a caring and rewarding environment where people feel inspired, respected and appreciated.”

Another ‘Development Day’ event in 1999, again involving the entire workforce, set out to codify and institutionalise these cultural norms into a set of policies and practices for people management. Following substantial workforce input into the first, and subsequent, drafts the ‘Community Company model’ became the company’s official philosophy in March 2000.

In 2000 the company launched a mail order venture, selling its products direct to parents. This brought the company into direct competition with huge suppliers of generic school wear such as the major supermarket chains. After two years of losses, and pressure brought to bear on the Directors by the workforce, who were losing large portions of their bonuses, the venture was regretfully abandoned. The failure proved a very stressful time, even a stern test for the firm’s way of conducting itself. A handful of disaffected employees left, but those who stayed felt that they had been kept informed openly and honestly about the venture, and in interview appeared determined that Sportasia would continue under a new strategy.

Partnership at Sportasia – policies and practices.

Sportasia’s model comprises six ‘pillars’ (Figure 1) embodying the principles enshrined in the ‘*We believe...*’ mission statement. To each pillar is assigned a communitarian-style exchange of ‘rights’ with corresponding ‘responsibilities’ intended to provide mutually acceptable “obligations” between the company and the individual employee. These are enacted by the company’s people management policies and practices.

TAKE IN FIGURE 1 HERE

The firm’s information-sharing covers “anything significant relating to the trading performance and financial prosperity of the company, together with any other items of general interest that may impact positively on people’s feelings of ownership and attachment to their company” (Sportasia, 2000: 14-15), while consultation is defined as “the engagement of people in the discussions that take place about issues affecting the direction of their roles and the organisation as a whole” (ibid). In practice, four consultative meetings take place every month sequentially. The first, at the team level in different departments, are known as Action Groups. These mainly cover the team’s operational issues, but also any company-wide matters requiring staff input. According to a Warehouse employee, “everything has to stop for these meetings, even at busy times”. The team leaders tend to facilitate these meetings, but the whole team is involved in the discussions. ‘Departmental’ meetings are scheduled a week later, and can last for half a day. These discuss department-wide concerns, including any arising from the Action Groups. The ‘Managers-Directors’ meeting follows the ‘Departmentals’ later in the month. Company-wide strategic decisions tend to be formulated here first, although Action Groups and Departmentals can put forward suggestions. Any significant proposals for improving performance or changes to employment conditions are taken to the Action Groups for staff input prior to the final decision. The ‘Managers-Directors’ meeting also considers personnel issues from each department. Finally there is the ‘Figures’ meeting, where the entire workforce (except the sales representatives) hears about the firm’s overall performance, projections, and strategic issues. As such, the management accounts are not shrouded in mystery and everybody has the opportunity to raise questions about them, or any other matters. In practice, shopfloor input here is limited, perhaps because the forum is so large, but also because the company clearly prefers the Action Groups as the most appropriate forum for staff input. To supplement communication the company produces a weekly A4 newsletter. There is also provision for *ad hoc* meetings, especially for critical incidents.

The firm’s reward policy is set within the constraints of its twin core values. Thus, Sportasia pays its staff a salary (rather than a weekly wage, or seasonal payments, as is common in the industry). Individuals’ salary increases are set annually in the ‘Managers-Directors’ meeting

according to individualised performance appraisals, determined initially by the employee's line manager and following an informal 360-degree review of the employee by her/his work team. The appraisal measures the employee's abilities and effort, but also their "attitudes" as derived from perceived compliance with the rights and responsibilities of the six 'pillars'. When asked to comment upon what might seem the paradox of a 'community' culture based on "collective effort" that rewards people individually, the MD argued that the policy is "a philosophical question of justice" about how people should be rewarded: "Across-the-board increases are completely unfair and de-motivating, because it doesn't reward individuals' own effort, and going the 'extra mile'". He denied there was an inconsistency "as long as it is kept within the realms of decency". Large discrepancies in salary levels within a job group are held in check by salary bands, and the highest salary earned cannot exceed 10 times that of the lowest paid (Sportasia, 2000: 51), while the senior managers' collective judgement is felt to provide checks and balances against victimisation or favouritism.

Basic pay can be bolstered by an annual profit-sharing bonus in which each member below Director level receives an even share of the allocated 'pot' regardless of status.³ Employees with more than two years' service are further entitled to buy shares in the company. The rationale for this is "about offering people the opportunity to acquire a stake in their own future. Providing people with a real opportunity to significantly impact their long-term financial security and well-being, directly, through their own efforts, both motivates and inspires" (Sportasia, 2000: 35). More than a third (37.8%) of the workforce owned Sportasia shares in July 2001, including almost 29% of non-managerial employees.⁴ When asked whether the firm had seen employee-owners seeking to exercise their ownership rights over company decision-making the MD reported none: "But the opportunity for that input is already there". The Personnel Director cited an emergency meeting of the firm's shareholders for which nobody turned up, several employees telling him that they trusted the senior management to act in their best interests. A sickness absence bonus rewards 100% attendance with £100, and each day taken off removes £20 from this total. With managers' tacit approval employees use the firm's 'time banking' system to protect this bonus.

The most contentious 'flexibility' obligation comes in the summer when extra weekend working (two Saturdays in June, July and August) is required of everyone, including the Managing Director. The popular time banking system has helped smooth the process. In return, all those with two continuous years' service have a formal guarantee that they will not be subject to compulsory redundancy. The rationale, within the 'rights and responsibilities' ethos, is that

"If [employee X] has given their commitment, loyalty and dedication – and 'time served' is a simplistic measure, but it's the best we can come up with – surely there is a right to some security and peace of mind in return... After two years [here] you've earned that security of mind" (MD, interview).

Provisions for major programmes of redundancy are not set down in a written policy, as yet. But the MD explained that the firm would "take every step before cutting the staff overhead cost", seeking volunteers first, then employees who had been with the firm less than two years (and hence are not covered by the guarantee), and finally across-the-board pay and benefits cuts.

³ Based on turnover of £5m a 10% bonus would mean a 'pot' to share of £39,356; 5% would mean sharing £14,363. 2001 saw around £60,000 profits to share equally among the workforce.

⁴ Appendices set out formal commitments on the percentage of shares to be offered to the workforce as the company's history lengthens: 5% by the firm's fifth birthday, 15% between 11-15 years of existence, to the eventual goal of 20% after 16 years.

Sportasia's managers lay great store by staff development. Each employee is entitled to two appraisal interviews per year, which focus on developmental needs and opportunities within the employee's own role, their department or through internal transfers. The company promises "appropriate support and training", subject to budgetary consequences and the requirements of the community. For example, some embroiderers travelled to Germany for direct instruction on the maintenance of the machines, thereby improving their skills and saving the company money at the same time. A warehouse employee, who had started work as a 'casual', said: "since I have been here [less than 12 months], I've had more training and development than I'd had in twelve years previously". In-house training courses cover a wide range of operational and behavioural areas, including 'Conflict Management', 'Decision-Making', 'Managing Meetings', 'Coaching Skills', Kolb's 'learning cycle' and 'Operational and Strategic Planning'.

There is also what might be termed a programme of 'cultural education'. This includes the bi-annual company-wide 'Development Days', company trips and social events and a programme of seven voluntary 'community classes' in which employees can learn more about the philosophy behind the firm's practices. The classes would seem to be popular and worthwhile if measured by employee participation rates, which have risen year on year.

Importantly, these arrangements are not a "fragile, 'pure' co-operation or consultation process, ultimately at managerial discretion" (Terry, 1999: 28). The structures and policies are institutionalised in the firm's constitution, which commits the company to operate according to these principles (76% of the shareholders are needed to amend the constitution), and a legally-binding agreement to abide by the model's strictures is written into the terms of the employment contract. (These have never been tested in an employment tribunal, but the firm's lawyers are confident that they are legally enforceable.) As such Sportasia's arrangements fulfil Hammer's call for "the public availability of as much detailed information about the mutual rights and obligations in an employment relationship as the employer is capable of committing to writing" (2000: 191).

Sportasia - why no trade union?

The MD explained his attitude toward trade unions thus:

"A trade union as a body representative of a large section of the workforce is entirely inconsistent with the community model... Something has gone wrong if in the structures there is a polarisation of needs to the degree that external intervention is required. If the power to effect change in a meaningful manner is already invested in individuals, and the organisation's structures and constitutions are set up to reflect this, then I struggle to see a meaningful role for a trade union".

A Personnel officer argued that trade union intervention would be

"a sign of failure... Confrontation and third parties are unnecessary. Conflicts can be resolved without them. If the culture is right for open and honest dialogue there is no need for third party representation... and you are very likely to be listened to here [over, for example, pay issues]".

For the Personnel Director collective bargaining was an "anathema" because he felt it almost never accommodates individualised performance-related pay.

No non-managerial employee interviewed expressed any desire for a union presence; when asked, none could see a role for a trade union. One shopfloor employee felt that a union "wouldn't work here. There are all sorts of safeguards in place. We are free to discuss things with our line manager. A trade union might jump in..." Another attributed the lack of a divide

along them-and-us lines to the extent of employee involvement. However, the MD insisted that he would be happy to accept a trade union presence *if the 'community' felt that one was needed*.⁵

Is Sportasia an example of partnership?

Returning to the six essential components of a partnership organisation outlined above, the firm is transparently run on the basis of securing collectively-determined success, and for building a positive, trust-based working environment (elements 1 and 3). The Sportasia model has rather less to say, however, on the principle that the legitimate and separate roles and interests of the parties be mutually recognised and accepted. Indeed, the firm's management use strongly unitarist language to describe Sportasia. In interview, the MD acknowledged the probability that such potential conflict exists in "most organisations to different degrees", but he insisted that Sportasia's community vision and 'pillars' have been designed, in part, to align and then manage both sets of interests for mutual benefit: accept and enact the required behaviours, and the conflict can be (as good as) eliminated, he argued. The Personnel Director elaborated, drawing on his admiration for William Glasser's work on psychological needs (Glasser, 1998):

"... If [the needs to belong, for fun, for excellence for freedom, for responsibility, and for power, cf. Glasser] do underpin what people want from life, our *raison d'être* [as a firm] is helping our staff meet those needs... If you do that, you can't help but succeed, because people *want* to come to work and be part of the community, although it's fair to say there are some needs profiles we meet more effectively than others".

If anything, the firm's extensive focus on satisfying employees' interests point to a 'sophisticated paternalism' (cf. Purcell, 1987), one in which the interests of the employer (i.e. efficiencies, productivity improvements, profitability) are notably downplayed.

On the crucial element of joint problem-solving to mediate between these potentially divergent interests, the general impression gathered from our interviews is that, while senior management take or endorse Sportasia's strategic decisions, mechanisms do exist both formally and informally for all employees to influence significantly the process and final outcome, and they are arrangements with which the vast majority of Sportasia's employees are satisfied. Most non-managerial staff interviewed felt that they had "a lot" of opportunities for input, and this was "very good"; it made one "feel valued". Describing the consultative process in the Action Groups, a Warehouse supervisor felt the meetings enable "people to look at various options... [Management] don't just dismiss ideas saying, 'you'll do it my way', we talk to each other and work things out". However, a few questioned whether the senior management team always responded adequately to suggestions from staff. One thought it "an ideal" not always fully realised. (For examples, see the footnote at the end of this paragraph.) The Personnel Director noted that non-managerial employee input tends to be keenest within the Action Groups and the Departmentals: "Employees are reasonably interested, but it's the local issues that get the most response". This echoes Wall and Lischeron's point (1977, cited in Blyton and Turnbull, 1994: 213) that issues directly affecting people's working experience tend to most exercise the minds of non-managerial employees.⁶

⁵ A trade union official has visited the site once when an employee asked to be accompanied at a disciplinary hearing. From the MD's account of the incident, it seems that the official could find little fault with the firm's processes, and "said, 'gosh, what a nice company'".

⁶ Perhaps the two most compelling examples of staff influence on strategic decision-making are the constitution itself, and the pressure brought to bear on the ill-fated School Trends Plus venture. Other examples cited by staff of their influence over company-level policy included amendments to both the profit-sharing bonus scheme and the time banking system after Action Groups "found holes" in the Directors' original ideas. Given a set of options for company policy on retirement age, consultation with the Action Groups revealed a preference for 65 over 60; this was adopted shortly afterwards. A sales administrator looked back over her two years with the firm, and could not think of a decision she thought had been unfair, or that she hadn't agreed with. At the more local level the warehouse Action Group adapted its invoicing processes to save £8,000 in postage, and also came up with their

Categorising the extent of employee involvement in decision-making within Sportasia is somewhat problematic. Using Dundon and colleagues' terminology on employee voice provisions (Dundon *et al.*, 2004), Sportasia's arrangements appear to the respondents, and to us, to embody both a 'contribution to decision-making' *and* a 'demonstration of mutuality and co-operative relations', while they best match the 'problem solving over shared objectives' category in Terry's two-fold typology of non-union forms of collective employee representation (1999: 17), in which employees enjoy 'co-operation rights' "to information, to protest, to suggest and be consulted" rather more than Terry's alternative system, 'bargaining over divergent objectives'. But on some issues the employees do appear to have enjoyed the latter's rights "to veto, co-decision and decision" (Terry, *ibid*), notably over the constitution itself. Finally, in relation to Marchington and Wilkinson's 'escalator' of employee involvement (2000), the structures are clearly 'consultative', and there is some evidence of occasional 'co-determination', but a few non-managerial employees' assessments did suggest the reality could at times be management-dominated. Overall, however, there is a strong feeling of genuine shared decision-making.

Sportasia has policies that satisfy the trade-off of employment security in exchange for flexible working practices, as it has for sharing success. However, in basic pay terms the Personnel team concedes that Sportasia "underpays" *some* staff, if benchmarked against comparable local firms. (Interestingly, this is especially the case for its managers, who earn considerably less than they might do elsewhere.) In 2001 all non-managerial employees were paid above the minimum wage, and the company was confident that it pays above the market median within the (low-paying) clothing and textiles industries. None were earning less than £10,000p.a. For this case study no employee complained about his/ her basic salary package.

With these policies and practices verifiably in place, there seems little scope to refute Sportasia's claim – were they keen to make it themselves – to being a genuine 'partnership' organisation. In common with other non-union examples, they do not use the term themselves (see IRS, 2000; Knell, 1999). Moreover, Sportasia would also appear to meet Haynes and Allen's (2001: 181) three requirements for an enduring partnership (in their study, between unions and management), namely mutual legitimation of sometimes differing interests, trust-inspired clarification of partners' different roles and behaviour, and the delivery of tangible, mutually beneficial outcomes arising from the co-operative arrangements. Finally, according to Kelly's two categorisations of [unionised] partnership arrangements (2004: 271), Sportasia does not appear to fit the description of an 'employer-dominant' model (in which employees comply with the employer's agenda, rather than co-operate actively) - although we can imagine that Kelly might classify *all* non-unionised firms under this category - but nor is it an example of 'labour parity' (a more or less even balance of power).

The firm's arrangements do seem then to provide the basis for a mutually beneficial employment relationship, and one which, to a significant extent, has been, and is, shaped by managers and the workforce in a joint process. However, it is not the case that all conflict has been eradicated. Drawing on our interviews with our shopfloor respondents we discuss this below.

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own system for locating boxes for despatch among the several thousand stored. A new recruit to the Embroidery department explained how she had suggested changes to shift patterns in her Action Group, and that this would be put to senior management.

All interviewees acknowledged that the company does operate in the way described in the community company model. All described a positive, friendly, respectful and largely egalitarian work environment. Most tended to identify with the firm's espoused 'community' values and, when asked why the company is successful, most pointed to those same institutionalised processes and cultural norms. When asked to explain the model (i.e. the six 'pillars'), most interviewees were able to provide a sketch, if not quite a word-perfect recitation. Unsurprisingly, after the two main authors (the MD and Personnel Director), other managers and the Personnel support team proved most effusive. The pillars "underpin the whole model" (Finance Director); they are "the glue that holds us all together... a sort of moral code" (Personnel officer); "it lives on an everyday basis" (Production Director).

Such enthusiasm among managers is to be expected. Managers are typically more inclined to engage with matters of culture and organisational design, and at Sportasia they have been recruited, in part, for their interest and enthusiasm for such matters. What of non-managerial staff? Every shopfloor/ administrative employee interviewed agreed that the 'pillars' are reasonable and make sense to them. They are, for one sales employee, "probably totally" responsible for the culture engendered, one she described as a "caring, rewarding, and inspiring environment". An embroiderer did not regard the pillars as "just a piece of writing. The philosophy is for a nice working environment, and putting it into practice". A warehouse worker called it "a very positive way of running a business". A production supervisor enthused, "it's fantastic... When I read it and went to [the training and classes] it really made sense to me... You can't go wrong with it". Another production worker described it as "common sense, and in practice it's brilliant. 98% of the time it works" - the other 2% he attributed to individual reactions to frustrations. Nobody objected to the model, although one admin officer felt that, despite the ambitions toward workplace democracy, much of the *real* power still resides firmly with the managers.

Sportasia's stringent set of values requires significant staff 'buy-in'. This begins with the recruitment process which, in effect, controls access to community membership through a battery of tests for 'cultural fit'. The rationale is that if new members join who are inappropriate, or who may prove disruptive or cynical, this could damage the coherence of the community and undermine the strength of its behavioural norms; it is easier to train and retrain people to do particular jobs than it is to change their values and beliefs. Hence, a demanding two-stage selection interview has the candidate discuss her/his motivations at work and in life, and overall compatibility with the firm's 'community' ethos and its implied attitudes and behaviours (including what a member of Personnel called her/his "emotional resilience"). The incompatible tend to "de-select themselves", in the company's phrase, either during the interview or the six-month probationary period. One could argue that this process serves to secure a non-radicalised workforce, since it would be expected to screen out personalities inclined toward 'them-and-us' perspectives on the employment relationship.

The induction involves time spent in every functional department, together with participation in the 'cultural education' schemes. These schemes are designed "to protect, evolve and develop the culture... The more [educational, social and cultural] work is done the healthier the company becomes" (MD: interview). In this respect, Sportasia uses completion of the classes as a pre-requisite for promotion to management positions. Intensive personal contact between managers/supervisors and their team members also sustains (and in part, monitors) adherence to the company's values.

An interesting finding, then, is that depth of conviction and 'buy-in' to the community values varies within the workforce. The Personnel Director estimated that "80%-plus share the company's values", and those for whom the values have been internalised "can see why when

they're challenged on contrary attitudes and behaviours". However, "only one or two visibly struggle [with the culture], because [the values] have not been internalised... They know what is expected, but they don't believe it, and so you can see them constantly trying to display the appropriate behaviours".

How does the company deal with inevitable outbreaks of dissent, or conflict of interest? The community model places clear bounds around what is acceptable behaviour at work; the 'rights and responsibilities' model is the company's ethics of conduct. From the management's point of view, it has been designed as a *written* psychological contract with each member that is understood by all and applied equally to all. Moreover, given that each member has subscribed to its terms, and that it was designed jointly by the workforce and management, it should (in theory, at least) be supported by all. When individuals' so-called "damaging behaviours" diverge from the model, managers and supervisors, and even shopfloor employees, find the model's values a useful restraining tool: a "normative control mechanism", in Kunda's (1992) term. A Personnel officer described how: "You can take people back to the pillars and say 'you're not doing that' [pointing to one of the pillars] or 'What is the consequence to the community of your behaviour?'"

Yet paradoxically, the firm's campaign to instil in its workforce commitment to cultural strictures *is* a rare source of conflict between the managers and a number of those on the 'shopfloor'. Some expressed reservations about the strict adherence required: "The 'culture and community' bit is a bit brainwashy... they feel we should all be the same, but we have different personalities and different reactions". Another felt, "in some ways we are acting a part, I mean, we have a 'script'..." Another admitted that there are several "Mr and Mrs Sportasia's. Some put on a face in front of certain people". Others felt free to ignore much of the cultural requirements of the job. One otherwise enthusiastic production employee admitted that they were "a load of nonsense... I take it as it comes, and don't bother about it". A colleague's attitude was similar: "I don't think about [the culture], I just come and get on with it. But you don't have to throw yourself into it. You can be an interested onlooker". This does lend credence to the MD's claim that while compliance is demanded, full immersion is voluntary.

When conflicts do occur they appear to centre on disputed interpretations about whether the incident constitutes a violation of the community's code of conduct. The company's default response is to view conflict as "human error" and therefore a training issue rather than a disciplinary matter. However, some managers wondered aloud whether the firm is too tolerant at times, too keen to pursue joint problem solving, to "coach people through it" (Production Director: interview). By contrast, one or two non-managerial employees recounted minor incidents when managers' reaction to 'non-compliance' seemed harsh. The MD views the firm's reluctance to resort to its formal disciplinary procedures as a sign of the community's strength.

The paradox is that the firm may be expending unnecessary energies on its cultural education programmes, when what its workforce values above all is the management team's consistency of attitudes, behaviours and treatment, thoughtfulness, support and benevolence. (One interviewee saw with the failure of the mail order venture another potential weakness with the 'cultural fit' fixation: that it may detract Sportasia from hiring and developing appropriate specialist expertise and skills for future requirements.)

Employee turnover, running at around 10-15% overall, breaks down interestingly according to time served. It is "quite high" during the first six months as some new recruits struggle to adapt, but thereafter, and especially after two years' service – when among other things the employment security guarantee comes into effect – employee turnover is "very low". Few of the long-serving employees interviewed contemplate ever leaving. As one Director noted, "the

closer you are to owning the values, the less [the requirement to comply] restricts your behaviours”.

Conclusion.

This paper has explored issues surrounding non-unionised forms of partnership. We have argued that *if* one considers the partnership relationship to be primarily between the organisation’s management team and the workforce, and *if* one allows for flexibility of interpretation on means for employees’ input into decision-making to accommodate forms other than the indirect channel provided by trade unions (i.e. works councils and staff forums, etc - as is, of course, the case in much of continental Europe), then non-union forms can exist.

Based on our in-depth study we would argue that Sportasia *is* a genuine example – relatively minor caveats about the occasionally overbearing cultural indoctrination, seasonal variations in workload and a few examples of ‘under-paying’ notwithstanding. Moreover, it has proven its adaptability and sustainability over 16 years. The case is interesting as a successful example of partnership working effectively and popularly, if not always perfectly, without the presence of a trade union. In other studies, Knell (1999) found negligible differences between his non-unionised and unionised cases for the DTI, while IRS researchers have even suggested that non-union forms are often “more developed and deeper-rooted” (IRS, 2000: 39). One hope is that wider awareness of non-union examples might extend the ‘partnership’ agenda beyond the confines of its current ‘union-only ghetto’. A challenge for trade unions facing people management strategies such as Sportasia’s is to demonstrate their so-called ‘value-addedness’ (on this see Terry, 1999: 28). One consolation is that such firms are extremely rare.

Finally, we would argue that the litmus-test for *all* partnerships - unionised or not - is the quality of the joint problem solving processes in the terms we suggested earlier: of giving significant influence to employees over organizational decision-making early in the process (Haynes & Allen, 2001: 181), and in delivering regular, acceptable mutual gains for all parties. Research into non-union forms of consultation tends to portray such forums as toothless (Blyton & Turnbull, 1994; Gollan, 2001; Hammer, 2000; Terry, 1999). However, employees’ responses to the WERS98 survey (Millward *et al.*, 2000: 129, cited in Gollan, 2001) suggested that non-union consultation was generally considered effective in keeping employees up-to-date with proposed changes and in enhancing managerial responsiveness to specific employee concerns, but less effective than unionised arrangements in promoting fair treatment for employees in general. That said, Freeman and Medoff (1984) have argued that the efficacy of employee voice depends ultimately on the way in which employees and managers interact: the process and conduct of the joint problem-solving. McLoughlin and Gourlay’s studies (1992, 1994) into 115 ‘high-tech’ firms in the South East (80% of which were non-unionised) found that the absence of a trade union channel could be largely off-set by the adoption of alternative “collective voice mechanisms” for representation of employees’ interests (such as works councils), and by “informal, non-institutional individual voice mechanisms” (1992: 673). The firms in their sample that married a high strategic integration of HRM practices with a strong emphasis on “individualist” means of governing the employment relationship tended to report having single-status terms and conditions, profit-sharing and/or employee share ownership, pay linked to appraisal and “relatively sophisticated” means for individual employees to provide input into organisational decision-making (1992: 679). Such a firm – with employment security provisions too - would fall under the definition of ‘partnership’ outlined above. Moreover, these arrangements resemble closely those within Sportasia. Future research might build on Kelly’s (2004) research into partnership and non-partnership firms, comparing paired unionised and non-unionised partnership organizations across a range of organizational and employee outcomes.

With trade union density in the private sector at just 11% (Taylor, 2001: 13), and the imminent impact of the EC's Information and Consultation Directive (which will eventually require undertakings employing more than 50 persons to inform and consult their staff across a broad range of work-related issues), more research is clearly needed into people management in non-union settings. This paper is part of an ongoing longitudinal study of one particularly curious and, we believe, admirable firm.

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FIGURES.

Figure 1: Sportasia ‘pillars’, rights and responsibilities.

PILLAR	RIGHTS	RESPONSIBILITIES
Information and involvement	Access to information and involvement in decision-making	Open and honest participation
Fair reward	Fair reward, avoiding indecent salary differentials	Honest endeavour and commitment
Shared prosperity	Shared prosperity through profit-sharing and share ownership	Full contribution to the community effort
Employment protection	Employment protection	Flexibility and adaptability
Application of organisational values	To be treated with fairness, consistency, respect and support	Protection and enhancement of the community by showing fairness, consistency, respect and support
Development opportunities	Training and opportunities for development	Commitment to meeting training objectives and to developing in harmony with the needs of the community

APPENDIX: List of interviewees by job grade (number of separate interviews in brackets).

SENIOR MANAGEMENT Number of interviewees: 6 Number of interviews: 13.	‘SHOP FLOOR’ EMPLOYEES Number of interviewees: 14 Number of interviews: 14.	OTHERS Number of interviewees: 9 Number of interviews: 11.
Managing Director (4x) HR/ Operations Director (3x) Production Director (3x) Finance Director (1x) Sales & Marketing Director (1x) Purchasing Director (1x)	8 production employees 6 administrative employees	Personnel Manager (2x) Personnel Officer (1x) Sales Manager (1x) Sales Representative (1x) Warehouse Manager (2x) Senior Operations Officer (1x) 3 Team Leaders (2 production, 1 telemarketing)

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